see-to-see

Review of Chantal Gibson, *How She Read* (Caitlin Press, 2019)

Elee Kraljii Gardiner

Chantal Gibson's first collection of poetic texts gathers peripatetic sources to school the reader in how we learn colonialism and other systems from the inside out. Based loosely on a 1947 educational writing and spelling book for eighth graders, *How She Read* is as close a poetic attempt of what Audre Lorde called using the master's tools to dissemble his own house as I've seen.

In the notes section Gibson explains: "Writing this book forced me to reflect on the colonizing effects of the English language and to challenge the rules deeply inscribed in my own thinking. This shorthand is derived from the process of deconstructing my own cursive handwriting. If you can't read it, you aren't meant to."

So much of learning takes place within the semiotic codes of a colonial framework. Gibson's sharp abilities and affinity for ideas of text and subtext and supertext combine into sparkling representations of how we incorporate lessons that are not only taught but inflicted. Gibson, an artist-educator who teaches writing and design communication at Simon Fraser University with an emphasis on questioning common knowledge and hegemonic structures, is clearly in her zone of expertise.

In one of the most unforgettable sequences, "Centrefolds: Delia & Marie-Thérèse on Opening Night," Gibson imagines the conversations between two black women of different time periods conversing through the frames of the portraits painted of them by white men. She reproduces the portraits in full colour (thank you, Caitlin Press, for spending the extra money on these images and the visual poems!) and reads us the portraits by voicing the women. The first four lines set the tone:

Hey, Girl. What's your name?

Africa.

Who did that to you, Africa?

Science.

In the exchange between these women across centuries a different type of learning ensues as they debate topics including McLuhan's medium vs. message, ideas of objectivity, and microaggressions.

A first read of these poems will be vastly different from the third as Gibson's lessons accrue. These come about subtly in the sequencing of the book and more obviously, in the gates and doorways of

redacted words and blank spaces. Gibson's metatactics of problematizing entry into the text lead straight from social critique to her central, perpetual question: does a reader ever decode a book entirely?

Gibson retools the idea of learning "slant" to paraphrase Dickinson, by studding this book with lodestones of Black culture, including Nina Simone, Harriet Tubman, Lionel Richie, Dionne Brand, and Maya Angelou. She begins the poem entitled "passive voice" with an epigraph from Rita Dove: "If you can't be free, be a mystery." This book is a prism of positions and possible lessons; Gibson reminds us that the most dangerous stance may be assuming that we already "get it."

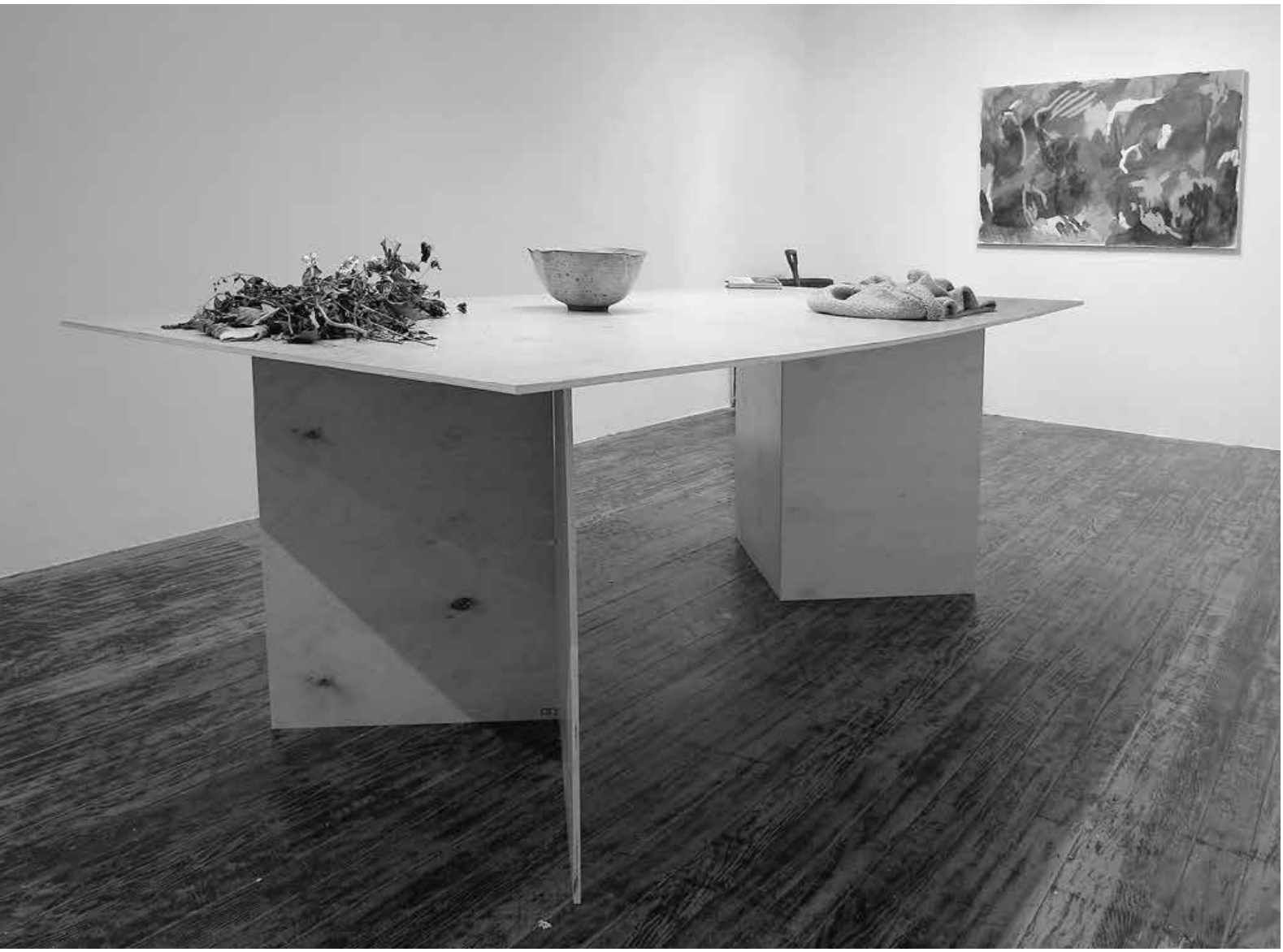
Review of Dina González Mascaró's *vessels are never empty* and Megan Hepburn's *Passing Through Smoke* (Franc Gallery and CSA Space, Vancouver, 2019)

Danielle LaFrance

The obvious reason to position these exhibitions next to each other is that they both engage with loss and transience. The other obvious reason is I so rarely attend art shows, these may be the only two I saddle up to see this year. But the other, other obvious reason is I know these artists, and perhaps this kind of intimacy gives a different perspective on the work they have produced. A different perspective, yes, but not a whole one.

So much of grief discourse provides the griever with a series of steps to cycle through in order to let go, move on, get past. Sometimes these guidelines help ease pain, but more often are far too didactic, too totalizing. Too understanding, even. This would already be, in any case, a question about the possibility of knowing, insofar as when we make claims on knowing another's experience we validate our own, possessing the other's as ours. We read ourselves in other's materials. My mother once thought a line in reference to rocks and hands in my book *species branding* was about her history with substance addiction. I told her that no, it was about rocks and hands, quite literally. In retrospect, it was not my place to dictate to her what it did or did not mean.

Grief takes on different forms. In González Mascaró's *vessels are never empty* it looks like two-dimensional charcoal and graphite drawings and found materials converted into brutal sculptures manipulated to form loosely defined organs. These crispy black vessels are not restricted; there is always an off-centre opening from which the seemingly empty contents can exit. From which they can breathe. While these vessels are "never empty," they also never settle for fixed ontological meanings. Are they alive or not? González Mascaró keeps the signification loose, allowing the vessels to be interpreted variously as inanimate holding cells for family ashes, bodies, hollowed out, even potential passageways (say, lungs) to bring air in from the atmosphere (the franc gallery, the witnesses) into passing oxygen into the bloodstream (the vessels themselves, the artist). *Vessels are never empty*



Megan Hepburn, *Passing Through Smoke*, 2019
Installation view, CSA Space, Vancouver

because we cannot help but fill them with meaning. Do not let go, get in.

In Hepburn's *Passing Through Smoke*, the form of grief looks like carefully selected relics of the artist's mother, carefully placed in the tiny CSA Space gallery. On a large table, taking up much room: a wool sweater, a bowl of mandarin oranges, a bouquet of desaturated pink peonies, sweet pea, mock orange, clematis, veronica, and basil (including some other unknown botanicals Hepburn texts me she foraged), and Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*. Around the periphery of the gallery sit a pair of old rubber boots with classic red-striped wool socks tucked inside, a pile of soil, and an audio recording by Alex Muir. Sutured within a hole in the wool sweater, within the pages of Atwood, within another hole in a sock, peaks a gold perfume head pump. Taking a cue from my own desire to touch and smell everything, heavy perfumes lie waiting to be spritzed, maybe behind the ears, by visitors. Scents begin to layer and meld and mask. Mandarin oranges are peeled and devoured. This act, obviously, elicits scent too. But I must emphasize that when I realized we could play with Hepburn's exhibition, it all became that much livelier than if the only option were to passively admire what once was.

Passing Through Smoke was up for just over a month. As it went on, the cut flowers' decay could be witnessed daily or left encapsulated by that one celebratory opening. The visitor makes a temporal choice: either we are committed to the short-term images we took that night or sit, a few months later as I am now, with the understanding that these flowers are gone. Always both and more. Even scents, while closely linked to memory, diminish. Perfumes, much like people, have a lifespan.

These are all such obvious things to say. Aren't they? Life is finite, grief is indefinite. Losing someone we love changes us psychologically and biologically. In an attempt to not become attached to things, we distill attachments through the things we make and make of them. Not capturing the final decay of Hepburn's bouquet does not mean they did not degenerate nor come back. Not filling González Mascaró's vessels does not mean they are empty nor full. And what does it matter—if it does not make death, light?

Review of the Indigenous Brilliance Series: Creating Safe Spaces for Co-Creation

Jónína Kirton

Indigenous Brilliance (IB) is not your average reading series, and I am grateful to have been able to play a small part in its beginnings. The series was launched at *Room Magazine*'s Growing Room Festival in 2018. A collaboration between the Indigenous Brilliance team, Massy Books, and *Room Magazine*, the success of this series is not only a wonderful example of collaboration, but also a fine example of reconciliation in action.

I spoke with two founding members, Patricia Massy of Massy Books and Jessica Johns, Managing Editor of *Room Magazine*.

I asked them both to share their insights into decision-making, the potential for conflict in collaborative organizing, and their approach to creating safe spaces for co-creation.

Patricia had this to say: "When making decisions within a group, it's definitely nice when there is consensus, and everyone is happy. We've been really lucky with the IB team. We all realize that what we are doing is not about ourselves, but about creating community, lifting one another up, and celebrating Indigenous voices. What's really great about the team is that we are all strong, independent thinkers. When someone has an idea, they pitch it to the group, and the group responds. If anyone has questions or concerns, they voice it, and we deal with it appropriately. Whenever something is written, we make sure everyone edits it. When we first started, an issue came up regarding checking in with one another on the making of collective decisions. This was voiced, and the person receiving the feedback was incredibly graceful, took personal accountability, and offered suggestions on how to move forward. We all learned from the situation, and it's never happened again.

"In a community setting, I strive for understanding. I personally try to be honest when I have an issue, and bring it up directly with the person, as I think it's much healthier to engage in respectful conflict than it is to let things simmer. Some situations require letting things go though, as they can be trivial and not worth jeopardizing relationships over, and some things require direct confrontation. I feel very fortunate to be working with everyone on this team. We work well together, are respectful, and have a deep passion and love for the work we are doing."

Jessica had this to say: "I prefer to work with others when the artistic project is a community endeavour. Working communally spreads out the balance of power as well as pools resources, knowledge, and experiences. I look for folks with the same mind to ethics of care as I have. People who care more about community engagement than careerism or social or monetary capital. I also look for people whose strengths are different from mine, who think differently and work differently to how I do. I feel this opens doors wider, lets more people in. I appreciate everyone's love and drive for this series. We spread out the labour as evenly as possible and try very hard to make sure that everyone is taken care of, both the people organizing and the folks we ask to participate."

I am grateful to those who have attended and performed at the events, and to Patricia Massy, Jessica Johns, jaye simpson, Emily Dundas Oke, Karmella Cen Benedito De Barros (their newest Indigenous Brilliance team member) and to Chelene Knight, Meghan Bell and everyone at *Room Magazine* and Growing Room for all that they have done to make this series such a success. They all take great joy in celebrating the brilliance of others. I will forever cherish the medicines and the artwork they gifted me and others who read at the series. This artwork sits on one of my altars and every day I read the words of thanks, *Maarsi*, *Miigwech*, *Kinanâskomitin*, while I give thanks for another day of walking beauty with others who also care for the sacred.

Emily Dundas Oke, *Maarsi • Miigwech • Kinanâskomitin*, 2018-2019. Watercolour on paper, 9 x 14 inches